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ABSTRACT

Similarities exist between Paulo Freire's radical approach to teaching and learning and the connected and constructed knowers discussed in "Women's Ways of Knowing" by M. F. Belenky, B. M. Clinchy, N. R. Goldberger, and J. M. Tarule (1986). The most important similarity seems to be their related understandings of the relationship between knowledge and "one who knows." Conscientization serves as one of the central ideas in Freire's conceptualization of education as a form of liberation. Connected knowing is said to "build in the subjectivists' conviction that the most trustworthy knowledge comes from personal experience rather than the pronouncements of authorities." Both epistemologies posit an interdependent relationship between the knower and the known. In terms of teaching and learning, one way to envision this relationship is to use a triangle, a metaphor familiar to rhetoricians, with the students, the teacher, and knowledge each represented by a different angle. As in geometry, changing one of these angles forces the others to change. Transforming the knower from an object being acted upon to a subject who actively constructs the world and moving the known from an exclusively objective entity to a personally and socially constructed phenomenon necessarily requires a reposition of the identities and relationships among knowledge, students, and teachers. Students are able to situate themselves critically in their worlds and teachers must redefine their function in the classroom. (Contains 9 references.) (CR)

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From Conscientization to Connected Knowing:

The Liberatory Epistemologies

of Paulo Freire and Women's Ways of Knowing

The title of my essay is "From Conscientization to Connected Knowing: The Liberatory Epistemologies of Paulo Freire and Women's Ways of Knowing," and, before I begin, let me say that the greatest source of anxiety as I was collecting my thoughts resulted from my intention to say something that did justice to these ideas in a limited amount of time. My biggest problem involved deciding what not to say, which is to say that these are limited comments.

As I just wrote, my discussion centers around the epistemologies of Freire's radical approach to teaching and to learning and of the connected and constructed knowers as discussed by Mary Field Belenky, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger, and Jill Mattuck Tarule in Women's Ways of Knowing, and I intend to discuss not the differences between these epistemologies, for, indeed, there are some subtle and not so subtle differences, but rather the similarities between these two epistemological positions and the ways that these approaches attempt to refigure the nature of teaching and learning. In order to contextualize these ideas, allow me to make a few, very general comments about these two approaches. Conscientization serves as one of the central ideas in Freire's conceptualization

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of education as a form of liberation, which he initially presents in a coherent form in the Pedagogy of the Oppressed, and in this book, conscientization "refers to learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (Freire 17). In Freire's approach, conscientization is intricately connected with his notion of "authentic praxis," which is an approach to learning that involves a combination of action and reflection (108-10), and the component of reflection, as Freire points out, designates a particular epistemological relationship with reality (Shor 31). In a similar manner, connected knowing, as it is presented in the taxonomy established by the authors of Women's Ways of Knowing, "builds in the subjectivists' conviction that the most trustworthy knowledge comes from personal experience rather than the pronouncements of authorities," and this type of knowing, they imply, represents a necessary step in the journey to constructed knowing, or a form of knowledge that involves the integration of the voices of separate and connected knowing (112-13).

Although conscientization and connected knowing have much in common, perhaps their most important similarity, at least for me, lies in their related understandings of the relationship between knowledge and one who knows. Both of these approaches critique the traditional conceptualization of knowledge, and they posit an interdependent relationship between the knower and the known. In Freire's characterization of the banking mode of education, which is his critique of the traditional, hegemonic conception of

knowledge, teachers talk about reality as if it is "motionless, static, compartmentalized, and predictable," and knowledge is "a gift bestowed by those who consider themselves knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing" (53). Similarly, the silenced and received knowers, as described by the authors of Women's Ways of Knowing, are knowers who are either disconnected from their worlds or who use listening as their sole source of knowledge. As an alternative to the traditional conception, Freire and Belenky and her co-authors posit an intimate relationship between the knower and the known, and this interrelationship provides the knower with the power to transform his or her world. In what sounds like an echo of Freire, the authors of Women's Ways of Knowing make a distinction between knowledge, which, they argue, suggests a separation from the object and mastery over it, and understanding, which, they claim, involves intimacy and equality between the self and the object (101). The "ontological vocation" of humans, as Freire characterizes it, is the condition of being subjects who act upon and transform the world and, in the process, move toward a more complete and rewarding life (Shaull 14). Further highlighting the constructive nature of knowledge, Freire connects this relationship to a larger social context by emphasizing an individual and collective intentionality as a precondition for knowing (McLaren and da Silva 54). This conceptual shift overtly signifies an altered power relationship, not only in the classroom but also, in the words of Stanley Aronowitz, "the broader social canvas as well" (9), and both of these

epistemological positions enable what Freire calls a critical consciousness, which is characterized by, among other qualities, an awareness of power relationships, a critical literacy, and a personal responsibility (Shor 32-33).

In terms of teaching and learning, one way that helps me to re-vision this relationship is to use a triangle, a metaphor familiar to rhetoricians, with the students, the teacher, and knowledge each represented by a different angle. Changing the position of one of these angles, as my ninth grade geometry teacher insisted, forces the others to change. Transforming the knower from an object being acted upon to a subject who actively constructs the world and moving the known from an exclusively objective entity to a personally and socially constructed phenomenon necessarily requires a reposition, nay a refiguring, of the identities of and relationships among knowledge, students, and teachers. Just as the nature of knowledge changes in this approach, so do students and teachers. Within such an approach, "the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student and students-teachers" (Freire 61). This new relationship is characterized by the presence of dialogue, which, according to Freire, is an encounter among people to change the world and which conceives of no dichotomy between itself and revolutionary action (118; 116--note 10). According to Freire, a true dialogue requires a profound love and a genuine faith--two qualities that are often absent in today's classrooms, and the presence of these qualities generates a sense of trust (72-72). Specifically for

students, one important result of this renegotiation is the validation of their cultural capital. Both Freire and the authors of Women's Ways of Knowing acknowledge the importance of personal knowledge and experience--Freire with his generative themes and Belenky and her co-authors with their legitimization of subjective knowledge. As a result, students are able to situate themselves critically in their worlds, to realize that reality is not static but transformative (Aronowitz 17), and, in the words of Ira Shor, "to question answers rather than to merely answer questions" (26). For teachers, this re-visioning, in some ways, has greater implications, for it necessitates a redefinition of their function in the classroom. To use an image from Women's Ways of Knowing that has become popular with feminist composition specialists, the new function of the teacher resembles that of a midwife, one who "assists in the emergence of consciousness" and who focuses not on his or her own knowledge but on the knowledge of the students. Too, such an approach shifts the power relationships between the students and the teachers. Not only, as Freire writes, can no one "unveil the world for another" (150), but, in their co-intentionality, the teachers must overcome their alienation from their students (Shor 26). This co-intentionality also calls teachers, as bell hooks acknowledges, to be committed to a process of self-actualization, which can be threatening for those teachers who are not concerned with what hooks calls "inner well-being" (15, 17).

In spite of the revolutionary power of this approach to the relationships among knowledge, students, and teachers, I would

not be so naive as to believe that every classroom that claims to be Freirean or to incorporate the insights from Women's Ways of Knowing is practicing education as liberation. As Henry A. Giroux points out, the North American and Western appropriation of Freire's work has lost much of the profound and radical nature of his theory and practice (177), and bell hooks and others have commented on prejudices ironically not only in Freire's early work but also in the world of feminism, a realm that often turns to the authors of Women's Ways of Knowing, among others such as Nancy Chodorow and Carol Gilligan, for support.[1] Too, the objections of Peter Elbow's clarion call in his article entitled "The Pedagogy of the Bamboozled," with his insistence on a professional integrity and on a consistency between one's philosophies and pedagogy, must be addressed if we are truly going to participate in education as the practice of freedom. Yet, as Shor points out, the transformation of students and teachers from authoritarian to democratic practices is a long-term project. And as I close, I want to acknowledge the catalytic value of even the most limited attempts to implement the liberatory epistemologies of Paulo Freire and of the authors of Women's Ways of Knowing, for these attempts do have the power to rupture the discursive formations, to appropriate Foucault's term, that characterize traditional classrooms, a power that, given the right conditions, reminds me of nuclear fission.

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[1]see, for instance, Gender Issues in the Teaching of English

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